

Slowing or Stopping the Turn to Authoritarianism in Israel

Alon Harel

2019-10-09T13:40:43

What are the Israeli elections about? Can the results of the elections bring about any fundamental changes or solutions to the challenges facing Israel and, if so, what types of changes are likely to happen?

We can divide those who address this question to two groups. On the one hand, there are the optimists. The optimists point out that it is now evident that no narrow rightwing government of the type that governed Israel in the last few years can be established. A coalition between the rightwing *Likud* and the centrist *Blue-White* party may perhaps address one or more of the three main challenges facing Israel: the conflict with the Palestinians, the conflict between the religious and the secular factions (in particular, the growing influence of the religious forces) and, last, the growing economic gap between the have and the have-not. On the other hand, the pessimists or cynics point out that none of these is likely to happen. A coalition which depends on the support of the *Likud* and *Blue-White* would be unable (and most likely also unwilling) to address any of these issues.

I believe both camps are right. The elections will not bring any change with respect to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the religious conflict or the growing inequality but, I will argue, the elections are important and even crucial for the future of Israel as they are most likely to slow and perhaps block the erosion of the protection of civil rights in Israel and the slow but continuous transition of Israel from a liberal democracy to an authoritarian one.

It is evident that the cynics are right. The centrist parties in Israel are unable and also unwilling to make significant steps to end the occupation or to solve the humanitarian crisis in Gaza. The so-called centrist parties consist of politicians of different stripes many of whom share the *Likud* rightwing views concerning the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Further, the results of the elections will compel any centrist leader to act in concert with either the rightwing *Israel Beyetenu* or with the religious parties and those will resist any compromise on the Israeli-Palestinian front.

For the same reason, no advancement on the religious front is likely to happen. Some of the optimists point out that a grand coalition consisting of the *Likud* and *Blue-White* can form a majority without any of the religious parties. *Israel Beyetenu* – a rightwing secularist party – which has become influential can also strengthen the secularist camp in the government. There is however one fallacy in this conjecture. The cooperation between the *Likud* and the religious parties is not an accident; it is a crucial interest for the *Likud* to continue and cooperate with the religious parties as such a cooperation will reward it greatly in the future. The religious parties benefit from a very loyal group of voters who vote for them in each and every elections and, hence, the continuing cooperation with them is a long-term interest of the *Likud*.

Netanyahu would be very reluctant to act in a way that would alienate the religious parties.

Last it is also unlikely that *Blue-White* would make any significant effort to transform the Israeli economy. This has not been part of their agenda. It seems therefore that the cynics are right and no advancement on any of the urgent challenges facing Israel can be achieved by the new government likely to be formed.

But in contrast to the cynics I believe the results of this elections are important for another reason. Most significantly they provide an opportunity of slowing and perhaps even undoing some of the measures designed to transform Israel from a liberal to an authoritarian state.

The last government has accelerated the process aimed at weakening the civil society in Israel, politicize the legal system and accentuate the discrimination against the Palestinian minority. These measures include: imposition of civil sanctions on supporters of the BDS, attempts to regulate and limit the entrance of members of NGO's to schools, stricter limitations on the entrance of political activists to Israel, politicization of the body that monitors high education in Israel (Malag) and many other similar measures. Most worrisome is the success of the former Justice Minister to transform the composition of the judicial branch by appointments which rest on the political inclinations of the candidates rather than on their professional competence. Last *Basic Law: Israel as the Nation State of the Jewish People* which was enacted by the last government includes some provisions aimed at alienating the Israeli-Palestinians. In addition to these initiatives, there were many more that have been proposed and that would have been most likely to pass had a new narrow rightwing government been formed. Most importantly these proposals were designed to limit the power of judicial review and constrain the powers of the courts.

All these measures are designed to achieve four main goals: 1) weaken the constitutional protections, in particular the protection of free speech and other fundamental liberties and also increase control over the media, 2) strengthen the executive branch at the expense of judiciary, 3) politicize bodies that so far have remained professional, 4) demote the civic status of Israeli Palestinians.

The establishment of a coalition of *Blue-White* and *Likud* will most likely put an end to this process. It seems therefore that the cynics are right that the new government is unlikely to address the challenges facing the Israeli society but it is most likely to block the process of the transition of Israel from a liberal to an authoritarian state. This is perhaps the most important (and perhaps only) consequence of the new elections in Israel.

